

## THE TRANSNATIONAL LIFE OF CHEESE

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### INTRODUCTION

As you pull off the E27 – the route that runs north from Lake Geneva toward Zurich - and swing on to the winding road that leads up to the Château de Gruyères, it is hard to miss the signs of industrial cheese production. The box-like buildings of Fromage Gruyère S.A., a facility that ripens and exports much of the world’s supply of Gruyère looms large. But these factories and warehouses stand in an odd relation to the village of Gruyères further up the road, which, with its reconstructed gates, renovated Chateau, and cobble stone square free of cars, is a touristic homage to a medieval past. Between the factory and Gruyères sits another building that can be read as an attempt to unite the images of past and present manifest in these other two ‘facilities’.<sup>1</sup> This site - La Maison Du Gruyères – is an example of a qualifying device that can only exist in relation to a translocal if not a transnational audience. It is a cheese museum; a site designed to structure bodily movement, channel visitors through a series of sensorial encounters, and orchestrate a particular narrative of an object. It is an attempt to qualify Gruyère and to produce visitors as consumers with tastes directly articulated with the qualities the museum seeks to attach to the cheese.

In its qualifying practices, the museum does not try to hide the industrialization of production. Instead it positions that industrialization as part of an orchestrated spectacular natural historical ‘journey’. This journey opens by showing visitors a very high quality film that visually and aurally defines the cheese as an integrated expression of an essentialised local knowledge, nature, and culture. Then, with the aid of audio headsets, it guides them through a hall adorned with images of the natural qualities of the cheese, and

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<sup>1</sup> The village of Gruyères is most certainly a tourism facility.

filled with scent tubes<sup>2</sup> that atomize and reveal those qualities. Finally it leads them into a four-sided gallery that overlooks a glass-enclosed demonstration of contemporary cheese making. Balancing this modernist representation of industrial production is a description of the history of cheese making in Gruyère ensuring visitors that while technology may have changed, the same recipe has been used since 1655 and “the know-how of the cheese-maker and the entirely natural ingredients remain identical.” La Maison Du Gruyères, in its totality, and with the authority drawn from the status of a museum, creates the ‘social facts’ of Gruyère – where it is produced, how it is made, by whom, for whom, in what quantities, with what qualities. It seeks to stabilize what is otherwise open to question.

In performing this work, La Maison Du Gruyères is not unique. Travel the byways of Europe today and it is next to impossible to avoid passing close to an orchestrated encounter with representations of cheese production. Increasingly, these are funded and constructed by producers’ consortiums but they attract visitors from around the world engaged in an increasingly important element of transnational cultural economies – culinary or gastronomic tourism. Like all museums, cheese museums engage in abstraction. They consolidate representations in order to produce coherence, and engage in acts of definition and circulation. Invariably they are sites that draw together and represent actors – farmers, livestock, techniques, instruments, knowledge, nature, and landscape – otherwise so dispersed over productive space and across time as to be near invisible. This dispersal makes coherent encounters with the work they do and the products they produce very difficult and haphazard, or at least it provides a different kind of coherence, one that does not suit the interests of cultural production so well. But who is the coherence for and what work does it do?

Answers to this question are multiple but it is notable that museums like La Maison Du Gruyères have only appeared over the last decade or so, the same period in which efforts have been put into qualifying cheese in relation to contemporary fields of taste and in which a range of actors have been drawn together to configure and constitute a transnational cultural economy of cheese (MacDonald 2012). As narratives of an

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<sup>2</sup> Scent tubes contain a chemical synthesis of the smell of particular plants so that when the tube is opened by pulling up an inner sleeve the scent of, say, chamomile is released into the air.

integral relation between nature, tradition and place have become important qualifiers in the extensions of markets for cheese, it has become essential to have consolidated spaces of display - like museums, routes des fromage or cheese festivals - to not only represent particular qualities, but to stabilize “the local” and to articulate new bodies of consumers with the representations that have played an important part in producing their identities as people engaged in ‘progressive’ forms of consumption.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, far from simply reifying glorified regional or national pasts these spaces are elements of conspicuous projects in the projection of specific transnational futures. They are expressions of how ‘the local’ has become a key component of ‘the transnational’ as it works to bring actors into relation across space through the configuration and shaping of fields of production and fields of taste. Commodity museums are but one manifestation of these articulations and appear as the economies they help to reproduce become more intensive (in terms of production) and extensive (in terms of market distribution). They address and articulate the interests of multiple audiences: the self-interest of producers in qualifying products; the interests of governments in realizing regional and national development objectives; and perhaps most importantly the interests of a spatially extensive constituency of consumers searching out goods that align with a politics of distribution and consumption that emphasizes rhetorics of locality, nature and tradition. Spaces of translation, like cheese museums are not intended for people intimately familiar with the social conditions and locales of production. They are intended to produce familiarity for those who exist at a distance from the sites of production. They are a mechanism designed to produce familiarity for an unfamiliar audience.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, this is not a new observation. Bourdieu (1984) and Callon et al. (2002), among others, have pointed out how processes of qualification involve a

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<sup>3</sup> These are often related to personal development – i.e., as moral actors engaged in acts of consumption that help to reproduce the relations of culture, place and nature that are essential to producing the ‘good’ qualities of the goods they consume.

<sup>4</sup> In a city like Toronto many diasporic communities are familiar with, and seek out culturally familiar goods. Indeed, it is in this desire of many diasporic communities to reproduce cultural identity through consumption that many other residents of the city experience the opportunity to encounter these goods. But this unfamiliarity is common enough to be used by some cheese sellers in acts of distinguishing their quality of service. Consider this press release from Nancy’s Cheese, a small specialty shop in Toronto: “Cheese. It is everywhere yet can be so intimidating. Walk into a cheese shop and, for most of us, the choices are overwhelming, the names unpronounceable, the terms unfamiliar. Add to that the often impatient service at many cheese counters and customers are left quaking and rushed.”

In A. Quayson and G. Daswani (eds) *Blackwell Companion to Diaspora and Transnational Studies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

multitude of actors drawn together around the object in ways that seek to both structure and circulate a model of consumption and articulate it with the intentional organization and regulation of producers. This relies heavily on representing a cultural logics of production, and is explicitly engaged in “the objective orchestration of two relatively independent logics, that of the field of production and that of the field of consumption. There is a fairly close homology between the specialized fields of production in which the products are developed and the fields in which tastes are determined.”

(Bourdieu, 1984, p. 230). Bourdieu’s point here is that the cultural production of taste mediates relations and forms of production and consumption. Changes in one bring about transformations in the other, and it is this orchestration that is revealed in spaces like *La Maison Du Gruyères*.

My objective in this chapter is to describe this alignment and articulation of the fields of production and consumption as an integral component in the production of a transnational cultural economy and the work of producing familiarity and to juxtapose the integral relations between the roots of cheese – constructs of place, tradition and nature - and the routes of cheese - the spatial extension of markets for a product simultaneously qualified as natural and cultural. Just as importantly, it is to reveal how this relation is achieved through practices of mediation. How is cheese made legible anxious consumers and what constellation of interests and actors is responsible for extending the historically circumscribed space of circulation for cheese? In addressing these questions I draw from observations in a range of ethnographic locations – the museum, cheese festivals and *maître fromager* classes - that allow insight into practices of mediation and consumption used by a range of actors.

But before moving on, I should clarify what it means to speak of a *transnational* cultural economy. It is to be concerned with the production of cultures of consumption built around shared systems of communication and valuing grounded in the construction of taste that create demand for particular types or complexes of products that either exist or can be brought into existence (Callon et al. 2002, Crang, Dwyer and Jackson 2003,

Hughes 2000).<sup>5</sup> But it is equally to understand how this process is configured transnationally – both in terms of transcending ideologies of nationalism and producing socio-spatial relations by drawing actors and their interests together around an object like cheese that has, through practices of qualification, become identified as transnational. Here I invoke transnationalism not simply in terms of an intensity of mobility or the multiplicity of attachment but to suggest that in being qualified as cultural, cheese, and its production, enters a field of taste that in many ways transcends historical attachments to scale – ‘national’, ‘regional’, ‘local’- even as those attachments are essential to the development of a spatially extensive web of consumers and an emergent politics of taste and distribution.

## **THE PAROCHIAL ORIGINS OF CHEESE**

Walking into a cheese shop today in a city like Toronto, where I live, is a microcosmic experience. It is to walk into a small, ordered, world of shelves stacked with cheeses organized by country, or even region, of origin, reducing the geographical complexity of production to the micro-globe of the cheese shelf. This shelf in the cheese shop, sagging under the burden of diverse products from just as many diverse locales, represents a coming together of different commodity worlds in a single space. And while this selective arrangement of ‘the world’s offerings’ is usually invoked as a veil that “conceal[s] almost perfectly any trace of origin of the labour processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production (Harvey 1989; 300), it is also a product of modernity; the outcome of a set of conditions through which emplaced elements of subsistence economies became mobile goods in global markets. Along the way, cheese, like so many other goods, has become an instrument in diverse political projects: the production of cultural identities; the promotion of regional economic development; practices of class distinction; exercises in defensive localism; and the manufacture of cosmopolitanism. This has not always been the case. To understand the

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., the production of cheeses that meet the cultural demands of consumers through the attachment of qualities such as exclusiveness, uniqueness, aesthetic characteristics, and sensory profiles that can be used in social acts of performance and distinction.

utility of cheese as an instrument in these diverse projects, it is necessary, at least briefly, to consider the history of ‘cheese in the world’, and the developments that set cheese in motion.

*“Pecorino is just cheese to these people.”* I overheard this remark while wondering the streets of Bra, a small town in the Italian Piemonte, during Slow Food International’s biennial cheese festival - an event in which the associations between producers, buyers, consumers, and distributors are (per)formed and open to view (MacDonald 2012). For all its flippancy, this comment expresses an important insight into the generic qualities of cheese in the place where it is made. To say that pecorino (a category of hard Italian cheeses made from sheep’s milk) is “just cheese” is to say that when a particular group of people refers to cheese, the referent is pecorino. But it is also to say that a cheese treated with special regard in places distant from the locale of production is an ‘everyday’ or familiar object to people who live in or near those sites.

What we might call this ‘origin reference’ is a linguistic reflection of the fact that cheese, whatever its distant historical origins, is a local material expression of human-ecological interaction. Specific types of cheese were common to subsistence economies and while there may have been variations in production between villages or valleys based on tenure rights, people living in specific places made and ate specific types of cheese and had little exposure to alternatives. This is not to say that trade did not occur. Indeed cheeses were likely a strong medium of exchange in local markets.<sup>6</sup> Certain cheeses – those with a durability and capacity to age well - did indeed circulate, but this was the work of itinerant traders and not widespread networks of distribution and exchange. Jacoby (2004), for example, describes the efforts made by Venetian traders, deviating from their regular sea routes to seek out and secure a stock of Cretan cheese to feed the new food consumption patterns in 11<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople driven by a growing urban social elite. Similarly, cheeses from Holland, were produced industrially by the 18<sup>th</sup> century to feed overseas markets served by a large merchant marine and navy.

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<sup>6</sup> Traces of this remain today. Unlike my cheese shop in Toronto, the shelves of the cheese shop in the village of Wengen, in Switzerland’s Bernese Oberland, are weighted down with wheels of cheese from surrounding alps. There is still a diversity, but the diversity is delimited by age and by a regional, rather than an international scale of distribution.

But for people whose lifetime spatial horizon was limited to a few kilometers, consuming a variety of distinct types of cheese was not a common life experience. For most, the scale of cheese –the geography configured by its circulation - was circumscribed by decay. Certainly fresh cheeses did not stand much of a chance of reaching ‘the masses’ beyond their points of production<sup>7</sup>. And Defoe (1762; 166), for example, in his travels through Great Britain describes stopping at an Inn in Stilton with a cheese “brought to table with the mites, or maggots round it, so thick, that they bring a spoon with them for you to eat the mites with, as you do the cheese”. But even harder cheeses, those that are compact and age well, were subject to destruction by mold, maggots and mites.<sup>8</sup> From its inception, cheese has always been an object hurtling toward its death. Indeed, this trajectory of cheese has been translated into a quality that long defined it as perhaps necessary – a means of storing protein - but not necessarily enjoyable. Despite recent attempts to romanticize histories of the circulation of cheese (Dalby 2009, Kindstedt 2011), “in the encyclopedic works of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, cheese is often regarded as an indigestible food, in particular old cheese” (Segal 1988; 73). These encyclopedic pronouncements were complemented proverbially - *Caseus est nequam, quia digerit omnia sequam* (Cheese it is a Peevish Elfe, It digests all things but itself)” (Oates 2003; 217) - and gave rise to a host of popular attitudes and beliefs about cheese: “the smell associated with decay and decomposition inclined people to imagine that their physical and mental health might be in jeopardy, that the substance might have a pernicious impact on the four bodily humors by means of vermin which would further exacerbate the existing putrefaction” (Bruyn 1996; 203).<sup>9</sup> Bruyn goes on to quote a mid-seventeenth Dutch academic’s observation that, even though it was a common foodstuff, “a good many people are averse to eating cheese because they are convinced that it is deadly and that its consumption breeds disease that may lead to

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<sup>7</sup> Many still do not but that is largely a function of regulatory restrictions rather than the friction due to distance.

<sup>8</sup> Not that this is universally seen as a bad quality. Casu Marzu, a Sardinian cheese with a long pedigree is still made by deliberately exposing the ripening wheels to the cheese fly (*Piophilidae casei*) in order for larvae to hatch inside the cheese.

<sup>9</sup> Bruyn refers to the first chapter of Piero Camporesi’s *L’officine des sens: une anthropologie baroque*, Paris 1989 – “Le fromage maudit” for reference to early medieval and modern texts that position cheese as a dangerous substance with a host of deleterious bodily effects.

death” (Bruyn 1996; 204). Cheese, in the early days of nationalism, was hardly the stuff of nationalist appeal. At least outside of its place of origin, it was not necessarily an explicit object of desire, even if it was eaten as a source of protein. So, while cheese circulated, circulation was circumscribed – the friction due to distance and popular attitudes toward cheese restricted its range of travel.

The affective component of cheese had to be produced and that, for most cheese eaters today, is a function of modernity. Of course, the abjection described in at least some historical texts is the perception of a class of people who could not afford to eat cheese before it reached that stage of putrefaction – before ‘the stench of death’ had set about it. This widespread limit to consumption is an important marker in the development of class associations with particular types of cheese, associations that would cause contemporary consumers to ‘quake’ in ignorance - for it is only people who were able to transcend subsistence limits, an elite aristocracy, who could imbue diversity with value. To use Europe as an example, it was at Court where a diversity of food was consumed. Contrary to the representations of organizations like Slow Food International, the peasant diet was restrictive well into the twentieth century (Pilcher 2006). The main components of subsistence diets were locally sourced, whereas a diet of nobility was more spatially extensive. This spatial reach included the capacity to accumulate diverse types of cheese. In feudal Europe, for example, a wide trade in cheese existed. Nobility owned dairy farms that produced large quantities of cheese and would supply cheese to court. Cheese was also used to pay tithes to the church and as tribute (Boisard 1992). And where cheese appears in the historical record, it is on the tables of the elite: “the name of Cheddar appears, for the first time in 1635, as that of a delicacy so much in demand at Charles I’s court in London that Cheddar cheeses were sold before they were made” (Dalby 2009, 23) effectively removing them from market distribution and restricting consumption to those with a royal affinity or deep pockets (Riley 2000). In the accumulation of regional produce from sovereign territory, the consumption of **diversity** is what can be seen to generate particular class associations with the consumption of cheese.

This is not to say that specific types of cheese did not take on particular class associations, but that ‘modern’ taste was shaped to some extent through a historical association with class, status and the ability to command the distribution of rare and



fragile goods and assign them the value that accompanies exclusivity. Indeed the origin myths of well-known cheeses like Roquefort or Camembert are rife with the trope of consecration by royalty. Narratives of Roquefort, for example, often contain a reference to the Royal sanction of 1411 in which Charles IV granted the people of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon the sole right to manufacture the cheese (e.g., Herbst and Herbst 2007; Masui & Yamada 1996). And the scalar leap of Camembert from local specialty to French national symbol is said to have occurred through a chance encounter in 1863 between the grandson of the supposed inventor, Marie Harel, and Emperor Napoleon III. The young man presented the Emperor with one of his Camemberts and the “emperor found the cheese much to his liking; congratulated its producer; invited him to his palace...and requested that he deliver the product to him on a regular basis” (Boisard 1992; 7). In this single act, the relatively new *local* cheese of Camembert was consecrated and made into a *national* symbol through the favour of a more potent national symbol – the Bonapartes.

### **ALL THAT IS LOCAL MELTS INTO THE NATION**

That the encounter is said to have occurred at the Surdon train station is not without significance. The concurrence of social revolution in Europe with advances in transport not only contributed to the development of an urban bourgeoisie but it facilitated the development of markets to provide urban populations with a range of commodities and provided outlets through which the consumption of diverse foodstuffs could be experienced. With increasingly rapid access to the produce of regional markets, cheeses were made available to urban consumers in varieties and volumes never before seen. But, in many ways, cheese is an odd comestible, for it has been both a dietary staple of rural producers and a luxury food for urban elites. Cheese became a luxury food not so much because of what it was, but because of the many different forms in which it could be consumed. The capacity to consume **difference** was the mark of distinction that connoted the food as a luxury. In many ways, then, cheese was a food that, on the one hand, transcended class associations through its universal familiarity, but on the other, worked its way up the European class ladder through the capacity of the nobility to accumulate and consume a diversity of cheese from a wide spatial region. What

distinguished, say, the 19th century Sicilian peasant from the noble, among other things, was that while the peasant could eat pecorino made in or near her land; the noble, could eat cheeses from across the country - “under premodern conditions, the long-distance movement of precious commodities entailed costs that made the acquisition of them *in itself* a marker of exclusivity and an instrument of sumptuary distinction” (Appadurai 1986; 44).

What is notable about the shifts following the mid-19th century is that the consumption of **diversity** that had been the unique province of nobility, and its signification of power, worked its way *down* the European class ladder until it became a mark of distinction for an emergent bourgeoisie (*cf.*, Mintz 1996). In Paris, for example, an increasing range of cheese had been appearing in city markets from the 16th century, but demand rose dramatically in the 19th century and regional cheese makers began to seek out urban-based distributors. Boisard (1992; 32) relays a tale from the diary of one Normandy Camembert producer who began shipping by train into the Paris market in 1858, and turned to the wider markets of Lille and Flanders in the 1870s. Whittaker and Goody (2001) note that while before 1840 the caves at Roquefort produced 750,000 kilos per year, by 1900 that had grown to 6.5 million as the consumption of the cheese was no longer restricted only to the rich and powerful. This spatial expansion, mimicked by other producers, demanded greater production, and many regions quickly saw the commercialization and industrial organization of cheese production.

But this shift did not occur without the articulation of cheese and cheese makers with new actors who could insert their products into circuits of distribution. Producers now required middlemen – market brokers and specialty grocers, something more than simply itinerant traders – to ensure the distribution and sale of their product. To some extent, the relation between producer and retailer was reciprocal. To maintain a mark of quality distinction and to supply not simply cheese, but a **diversity** of cheese, the retailer needed to seek out new sources of product. The tale of the House of Androuët, one of Paris’ primary *fromageries*, is an origin myth from the turn of the 19th century that heralds the structure of contemporary cheese distribution, hints at the role of the distributor and retailer in structuring consumption, and the importance of ‘the nation’ in mediating that consumption:

*When Henri Androuët, who started off as a peddler for Gervais, had the idea in 1909 of making cheeses from all the regions of France available for tasting to Parisians who were unaware of their country's rich cheese heritage, the history of the house of Androuët began. Henri Androuët went into business for himself and opened his crémèrie in the rue d'Amsterdam the following year. The house of Androuët was born, and with it the concept of curing as a principle of production.*

*After the tragedy and disruption of the Great War, he developed his business, curing and aging the available cheese on the market. The banality of the products then being distributed encouraged Henri Androuët to seek out new ones, even going to visit the producers directly in order to get them. His quest for cheeses led him to crisscross France at a time when country roads were still unpaved, slowly acquiring a unique and profound knowledge of the cheeses of France, the places where they are made, and the people who make them.*

*In the mid-1920, the fame of the house of Androuët, which by then was offering more than one hundred cheeses, had reached the point where Henri Androuët was prompted to open a tasting cellar which soon became a gathering place for cheese lovers. Around 1925, out of a desire to familiarize people with the resources of France's terroirs, Henri Androuët created his "cheese calendars." They listed over one hundred types of cheese, each presented under a regional or local name and accompanied by its period of full maturity. The innovative brochures were a huge success, and seeing the interest and curiosity that had been awakened in his customers, Henri Androuët opened a tasting room adjacent to his curing cellar. The cream of Paris cheese-loving society rushed there to discover traditional recipes using cheeses... ([www.androuet.com](http://www.androuet.com))*

In this origin myth Henri Androuët and his son, Pierre, are positioned as arbiters of taste, their position legitimized through the acquisition of a specialized knowledge acquired through travel to the source of the product. Of course, this history is constructed to serve the contemporary needs of the Androuët Company.<sup>10</sup> But the narrative plays on latent

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<sup>10</sup> Which, in the last ten years, has broken its national bounds and riding the crest of 'foodie' culture established eateries in London.

imaginaries that hold some value for contemporary consumers. In this narrative, the Androuët's are culinary pioneers of sorts. They not only source and deliver the commodity to unfamiliar consumers, but they literally teach consumption as spatial practice, invoking *terroir* as a basis of distinction between cheeses, and, through their tasting rooms, set normative standards for the consumption of cheese. The role of cultural broker assumed by the Androuët's is made possible by a product set in motion, released from a cage of regional limitation not only by modern transportation technologies, but by social changes that witness the devolution of dietary habits, practices, and tastes through class hierarchies. Androuët (the firm) is obviously trying to cultivate an image of prestige, innovation, and tradition in their narrative, but the story suggests that the rise in the 'appreciation' of cheese is a phenomenon associated with the development of an increasing interconnectedness in France. It speaks to the development of associations between actors and objects that bring into being new realms of circulation for cheese. It also suggests that the capacity to experience diversity was only available in the large urban centers to an educated class who could afford the product and whose capacity to engage in acts of distinction was enabled through agents like the Androuët's.

Like Le Maison de Gruyère, Androuët's tasting cellars were an act of consolidation as much as comparison, bringing together in time and space that which was otherwise difficult to conceive – 'French' Cheese – and making it available to an aspirational class. The consumption of a diversity of cheese, along with other products associated with nationalism, became a way of establishing class boundaries through consumption and thus a mechanism for social distinction. But this act of distinction relied on learning to appreciate, via the skills of brokers like the Androuët family, 'the resources of the nation's *terroirs*'.<sup>11</sup> *Terroir*<sup>12</sup> is an effective mediating trope. Even as it communicates both a scale – "local" - and a condition – something typical of the locale -

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<sup>11</sup> A process very similar to the maître fromager and cheese appreciation classes that have sprung up all over North America in the last decade.

<sup>12</sup> *Terroir* is intrinsically a vague and contested term – the extra 'something' that combines natural qualities with histories of human occupation, knowledge and practice and essentially defines a regionally typicality (see Trubek 2008). Despite its appeal to the ethics and aesthetics of a romantic naturalism, *terroir*, is rarely treated as a social construct. But see Tomasik (2002), Berard and Marchenay (1995) and Guy (2003) who makes the point that before *terroir* became translated into a localized expression of national interest, it served as a rural proletarian strategy to challenge the alienating effect of capitalist-state alliances.

it allows two products of human ingenuity, cheese and ‘the nation’, to valorize each other. Barham (2003), for example, notes that French government agents cited *terroir* as the most important of 27 concepts they use in assessing requests for *appellation d’origine contrôlée* (AOC) designation<sup>13</sup>. Despite its contemporary use as a mechanism of defensive localism, for the modern state, the valuation of *terroir* (and related concepts) and geographical typicality lies, at least partially, in nationalism’s ability to simultaneously invoke an appreciation of diversity (diversity of regions, diversity of produce, diversity of peoples, diversity of history) and the capacity of the nation to both contain and foster that diversity. In the context of a nation, representation of regional typicality through material product is a mode of expressing the benevolent nurturing powers of nationalism – in essence a statement that ‘we, as a nation, can maintain difference within our unity’.<sup>14</sup> Through the consolidation of diversity cheese can become re-imagined in the service of a nation and in particular sorts of nationalisms. Charles De Gaulle, then, was being disingenuous in 1962 when he posed the oft-cited question – “How do you govern a nation with 246 different kinds of cheese?” He knew well that you govern by regulating, sanctioning, and allocating the authority of the state in ways that unify the interests of the cheese makers; that you make the state responsible for regulating their production and distribution and you articulate each with the idea of ‘the nation’, in this case ‘the nation’ as a construct that unites diversity.

And, indeed, it is to the nation, or more accurately the state, that producers turn when external forces threaten to undermine the boundaries and the ‘value-added’ of ‘the local’. For all its cultural significance, and its supposedly detectable innate qualities, *terroir* requires codification to provide producers with protection in contemporary markets. And this protection has developed, over the past century, in the form of state-

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<sup>13</sup> The French national Geographical Indication, or certification of origin, label. Other European nations followed the French example and national GI legislation in Europe was rationalized in 1996 under the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, which established a hierarchy of geographical indication legislation, the most stringent of which is the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). Like much EU legislation, the PDO is grounded in, and works through, the legislation of member states where it previously existed, and implements new legislation where it did not.

<sup>14</sup> It is significant, for example, that a successful AOC application in France not only legally protects the appellation as the collective property of the producers, but officially designates the product as part of the agricultural, gastronomic and cultural heritage of France. (Douget and O’Connor 2003).

managed certification schemes such as “Geographical Indications”<sup>15</sup> and more specifically the judgment, technology and legislation administered by state bureaucrats that underpins those mechanisms. Notably, it is the state that sanctions *terroir*; “the nation” that sanctions “the local”. The nation becomes inscribed in the product partially through representations of the essential qualities of national territory but also through the regulation of technology and taste guaranteed through the authority of the state.<sup>16</sup>

My point in describing the process of qualifying cheese as national and the integration between representations of cheese as local and national is to effectively define the terrain of the transnational. With the interlinking of communication networks and modes of distribution in the late 19th and early 20th century Europe, cheese entered wider channels of spatial circulation. This mobility of cheese – its capacity to become ‘national’ - was driven by the creation of new value, spurred not only by the social aspirations of a new consuming class but also by the capital interest of producers seeking out new spatially extensive markets for their products. But this could not happen without new relations of production. A new consuming class had to be provided with the knowledge of the product and the means through which to recognize and engage in acts of distinction. The emergence of tasting salons and subsequently the introduction of ‘the cheese course’ and ‘cheese plates’ into restaurant meals offer opportunities for this, but just as important is the circulation, beyond the nation, of people with national rather than simply local affinities.

The nation serves as a discursive device to qualify a good – cheese – but does so in a way that unifies difference through articulating localized objects with a singular transcendent ideology (the nation). The effect of unifying difference is to produce what we might think of as an ‘object space’. Walk into most cheese shops in North America; look at the shelves and the nation figures prominently in the arrangement and presentation of cheese. ‘The nation’ has become a common register, if not in the division of space on the cheese shelf then certainly through some other identifying marker such as

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<sup>15</sup> GATT (Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual property Rights (TRIPS), Annex 1C, article 22), defines these as: “indications which identify a food as originating in the territory of a [member] country, a region or a locality, where a given quality, reputation or characteristic of the good is exclusively or essentially attributable to its geographical origin, including natural, human and heritage factors.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., government tasting panels, lab equipment required to assess whether a product satisfies minimal qualities of regional *terroir*, and the certification labels that communicate this to consumers.

national flags spiked into the top of a wheel. The space of goods may be international, but cheeses can be distinguished on the basis of their ‘national’ quality. The nation has historically been an important quality in the context of the transnational circulation of cheese. This was clearly the case for North American consumers. As Europe was discursively produced as a seat of culture and civilization so cheese, as a part of national imaginaries, came to embody these qualities. For consumers, a local appellation may have been meaningless; they had no way to position it. If referring to a cheese as Cabrales brought a blank stare, calling it Spanish Blue unearthed essentialised images of history, rusticity, and tradition. This has all changed.

### **CHEESE IN MOTION: QUALIFICATION FOR THE TRANSNATIONAL SPHERE**

The cheese shops I visit in Toronto give me better access to more of the world’s cheeses than those in major European cities. While shops in Paris, Torino, Zurich or Amsterdam may carry a broader range of regional products, that selection is delimited by articulations with surrounding environments, ‘the nation’, or some notion of what constitutes ‘the best cheese’. This might be read as a reflection of the significant global growth in markets for fine cheese. The signs are evident in the relatively affluent sections of cities where one of the early signs of gentrification is a specialty cheese shop. It is also evident in the rise of market devices that link distribution with popular culture: cheese appreciation classes, cheese-of-the-week columns, cheese plates in good restaurants, cheese blogs, management consulting services for entrepreneurs wishing to open specialty cheese shops, and in the ultimate sign that a product has secured a place of prestige in society, cheese now has its own consumer-oriented magazine. But, this seemingly unremarkable fact of access and distribution masks an important dimension of a transnational cultural economy – that the flows of goods, ideas, information, and the resulting ‘scapes’, are configured and mediated by the diverse interests of a host of actors drawn together by the multiple sources of value read into an object of regard (Latour 2007) - in this case cheese. Just as cheese required the alignment and articulation of certain actors to be qualified as national, becoming transnational requires specific actors

to qualify cheese in ways that orchestrate the field of production and the field of consumption and to mediate relations of unfamiliarity.

The circulation of an object like cheese away from its locale of production generates the opportunity for mediating practices. Some of these are clearly logistical. Cheese needs a transport infrastructure to carry it to market, it needs traders to negotiate the relation between a single producer and a diversity of retailers, it needs the regulatory apparatus that ensures, for example, the terms of a contract between producer and trader, the certification of authenticity of the product that provides it with retail cache, or the safety of the product. But others involve mediating the “peculiarities of knowledge that accompany relatively complex, long-distance, intercultural flows of commodities.” (Appadurai 1986; 41). Freeing cheese from its parochial sites of production, where discrepancies in knowledge have been overcome often by decades if not centuries of shared meaning-making, and sending it into wide circulation opens up discontinuities in knowledge at multiple points in the commodity circuit. These discontinuities produce arenas for value creation, as problems involving authenticity need to be mediated by the enactment of regulation and/or expertise designed to establish new grounds for assessing quality and for standardizing valuation.

In his discussion of the transcultural flows of commodities, Appadurai recognizes that distance (both spatially and culturally) creates conditions in which unfamiliarity can not only shape the flow of goods but also play a strong role in how they are qualified to address a politics of distribution and recognition: “[w]hen there are discontinuities in the knowledge that accompanies the movement of commodities, problems involving authenticity and expertise enter the picture ... as the distance between consumers and producers is shrunk, so the issue of *exclusivity* [which assigned status value to cheese when it was a means of gastronomic distinction] gives way to the issue of *authenticity* (Appadurai 1986;44, emphasis mine). This concern with authenticity is, in part, what lends such currency to instructive sites like Le Maison de Gruyère and provenance-certifying mechanisms like Geographical Indications.

These concerns also bring new sets of actors into relation: regulators and regulatory mechanisms concerned with vouching for the safety and ‘authenticity’ of a good destined for unfamiliar retailers and consumers; distributors, marketers and



associated practices oriented toward increasing the knowledge base of retailers and the ‘sophistication’ of consumers; consumers and new modes of consumption shaped by engagements with diverse forms of cultural knowledge and practice (see Cook et al., 2004). All of these, however, draw value from a politics of recognition that relies on some implied material cultural quality of the good. For example, cheese as a manifestation of durable ‘traditional or sustainable livelihoods’, cultural knowledge or practice, or nature cannot be separated from its capacity to facilitate acts of distinction through its association with ‘the local’, ‘the nation’ or class (de Certeau, 1986). This points to the ways in which even taste is iteratively shaped through multiple and diverse attachments to forms of qualification, and the politics of distribution and recognition, and therefore crucial to the configuration of transnational cultural economies of goods like cheese (see also Korsmeyer, 2005; Johnston and Baumann, 2009).

In locales of production, the narratives and practices built around the production and consumption of cheese are understood as a process of socialization into ‘a culture’, and consequently as a condition of producing culture. However, as products like cheese break the parochial bounds of their production, a partial gap is opened in which a new politics of recognition and distribution becomes possible. It is in this political space that new forms of value creation are brought into being, and new modes of qualification created to mediate the encounter with new, unfamiliar, audiences. Below, I turn to two examples of this process that shape the orchestration of fields of production and consumption. The first is a virtual moment in the life of a social movement that seeks to redefine relations between consumers and producers in order to defend small-scale livelihoods and ways of life. The second is the more obscure domain of taste education.

### **Slow Food, *Cheese!*, and practices of qualification**

The configuration of a transnational cultural economy of cheese is revealed every other year in a small town in northern Italy when actors come together to ostensibly celebrate cheese at a festival of the same name – *Cheese!*. Convened by Slow Food International, the festival occupies the centre of this medieval town and attracts over 200,000 people over a four day run. Slow Food is an organization focused on improving

the quality of food production and the enjoyment associated with eating. Born of the northern Italian Left, it grounds the defense of rurality and rural modes of production in the consumption of products that emerge from ‘local’ ways of life, and seeks to promote this through reducing the social distance between production and consumption through the promotion of what it describes as taste education.<sup>17</sup> It deploys numerous devices to achieve this but primary among these are *presidia*, *convivia*, and the festivals that link these social forms. *Presidia* are organizations of producers convened around a product tied historically, economically, and culturally to a precise territory or locality and serve as a mechanism through which Slow Food can provide technical assistance, apprenticeship training, assistance with government regulatory systems, and promote consumption through the development of market outlets. They serve as the core of Slow Food’s efforts to raise awareness of the relations between consumption decisions and the continued existence of localized ‘artisanal’ knowledge and practice. *Convivia*, conversely, are local ‘chapters’ of consumers and food professionals, and are often described in Slow Food literature as the frontline in the ‘defense of pleasure’ which is meant to be fought by engaging in models of consumption that support *presidia* and *presidia*-like products.<sup>18</sup> The third mechanism is festivals like *Cheese!* that ostensibly promote ‘the education of taste’ and celebrate the products and social relations brought into being through the actions of *presidia* and *convivia*. In practice, however, they provide an arena for acts of qualification that seek to simultaneously, create and circulate models of consumption and qualify products in ways that attach consumers, via their politics of consumption, to those products.

As a microcosmic expression of the transnational cultural economy of cheese, *Cheese!* is an effective vantage point from which to observe, document, and analyze the ways in which cultural producers like Slow Food orchestrate, mediate and define ‘goods’ in relation to political objectives, and the broader socio-spatial effects of those practices. Like other sites of observation, it brings together actors - cheese makers, consumers, distributors, retailers, scientists, connoisseurs - otherwise dispersed in space and opens to

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<sup>17</sup> See Leitch 2003, Peace 2008, Lotti 2010, and MacDonald 2012 for descriptions and critiques of Slow Food

<sup>18</sup> given the expense, and consequent exclusivity, of many of these products, Slow Food is often subject to a class-based critique.

view relations and encounters usually hidden behind closed doors. More importantly it exposes the role of these actors in qualifying the product, an explicitly cultural act that entails delineating the meaning of goods and communicating that meaning, often through a reliance on symbolism.

Among the lanes and squares of Bra, *Cheese!* constructs a space of convention defined through dispersed ‘stages’ that are linked by the actors that travel through them. The *Mercato del formaggi* convenes cheese makers and sellers who pass out samples to the hordes of people elbowing their way through the laneways. But their main objective in coming to Bra is to establish associations with retailers and distributors needed to stabilize the circulation of their products in a transnational market. Another ‘stage’ in Bra is the Presidia booths where, as cheese makers hand out samples and sell their goods, banners adorning their kiosks seek to distinguish their cheeses even as they adhere to a standard Slow Food script that emphasizes the qualities of nature, tradition, culture, knowledge, and place:

*Bitto cheese descends from an **ancient tradition** of **high mountain** cheesemaking. Slow Food created this presidium to help augment and maintain the production of Bitto cheese from **Alpine meadows**. Presidium members are engaged in maintaining and promoting a list of **traditional practices**: from the rearing of **local goats** (the cheese is made with 10–20% goat milk), to the rationing of pastures; from **manual milking**, to the use of **calècc**, **ancient stone huts** that serve as mountain dairies (Fieldnotes, Bra, Italy, September 22, 2007, emphasis mine).*

This mediating text is characteristic of Slow Food promotional materials and reveals how particular kinds of cheese are qualified as moral objects through the assertion of a naturalism that invokes both ecology and aesthetics and conflates them with social relations in the form of ‘tradition’.

This is reinforced in the other more restrictive spaces that make up the pedagogical ‘stages’ of *Cheese!* For a fee participants can engage in programs geared toward ‘taste education’. These include the more refined space of the Great Hall where consumers can sample rare and award-winning cheeses from around the world; the Master of Food Classes led by a roster of Slow Food experts who relate specific associations between product, history and the natural and social qualities of place, and

where students can begin to acquire the knowledge required to produce themselves as culture brokers; the *Laboratori del Latte* that draw together ‘technical experts’, Presidia representatives, and small audiences into conference-like sessions focused on esoteric discussions of the science of cheese production; and the *Laboratori del Gusto*, the taste workshops, built around the mediating practices of maitre fromagers who seek to guide participants through the ‘proper’ practices and registers of engaging with cheese, and quite explicitly performing the proper vocabulary ‘required’ to describe its qualities.

*Cheese!* reveals organizations like Slow Food as important nodes, mechanisms, and actors in the development of a transnational cultural economy. In concentrated time–space it effectively builds associations of diverse actors and interests around consumption in ways that reveal the instrumentality of culture, nature and history in structuring the value of commodities. It also effectively configures a microcosm of that cultural economy in which it becomes possible, at one ‘site’, to observe how the creation of value in relation to a product like cheese represents “the strategic interests and partial knowledge with which particular actors encounter and construct a commodity at different moments in its circulation.” (Foster, 2006, p. 288)

Indeed, the entire festival can be understood to some degree as a configuration of actors engaged in producing cheese as a transnational object. Around every corner narratives reveal the metrics and the processes of qualification that produce cheese as a moral good, brings ‘the local’ into being and simultaneously ‘displaces’ it by situating the social relations of production in transnational circuits of regulation and consumption. Ultimately these forms and practices of qualification travel out of places like Bra and wend their way into convivia where they spread among members, into the columns of food journalists, into books, into documentaries, and into cheese classes. Back in the cheese shops of Toronto I hear the same stories that are told in Bra, passed on by distributors as they work to enroll retailers in the project of orchestrating fields of production and consumption. They also spread into the more restricted spaces and practices that produce ‘experts’ and that work to create a shared meaning of cheese and resolve discrepancies in knowledge and the anxiety created as commodities like cheese travel into terrains of unfamiliarity.

### **Anxiety and the Education of ‘Taste’**

It is by now a fairly common observation that food is never simply eaten; that “its consumption is always conditioned by meaning. These meanings are symbolic, and communicated symbolically; they also have histories” (Mintz 1996; 7). What Mintz misses here is that these meanings also have places; that the meaning of consumption (even of the same commodity) varies in time **and** space. And, in places where consumption of a commodity is a relatively new experience, there is a struggle to imbue consumption with meaning; to overcome, through the production of an expertise that can sanction authenticity, the discontinuities of knowledge that occur as commodities move.

To some extent, a frame for that meaning is latent. In North America, for example, cheese is introduced into a context in which many people know the qualities of food that they want to consume to make statements about themselves and what is important to them. They may, for example, choose to consume products that convey certain politics including a respect for ‘the natural’ (cheese made using small-scale, non-industrialized production techniques), or to acquire social status. Their problem, being so physically and ideologically distant from sites of production is that they do not know whether a cheese actually conveys these politics. They need some vehicle to certify the authenticity and accuracy of what they seek to consume. This unfamiliarity generates a particular ambivalence and ambiguity that surrounds cheese and reaches out for some kind of authoritative advice.

The way in which a desire to consume is blocked by ambiguity is also not lost on those who seek to expand their markets. In the words of the former president of the French Commission for Sustainable Development:

“If we want consumers to consume “*terroir*” products and services, we need to set up procedures allowing the identification of their characteristics and to foster synergies between the action of local bodies in charge of local development and production and distribution networks. But ...one also needs to work on the demand end by advocating consumption models and life styles that contribute to personal development. In consuming ‘diversity’, we increase our personal

‘diversity’. Diversity encourages human development and is thus an essential component of sustainable development. But consumers must be given the capacity to orient their consumption in this way.” (Brodhag 2000)

And therein lays the role of the contemporary broker in the production of a transnational cultural economy of cheese: the manufacture of consumption models – new cultures of consumption - framed as personal development; and the reduction of the anxiety associated with the lack of product knowledge. To an audience unfamiliar with a commodity, certain instruments have proven useful in the reduction of consumption anxiety. Perhaps the most important of these is expert guidance.

Expertise is found in many forms, but it must be enacted to be produced. ‘Experts’ must first acquire ‘expertise’ before they can deploy it. That problem has been readily solved by what we might call pedagogical entrepreneurs who have, for the last decade, been producing courses to teach expertise and the scripts and practices to enact it. Starting in the 1990s, buyers and brokers who could negotiate European marketing systems and North American regulatory regimes quickly became the control point of an expanding market, developing new supplies, “taking on regular customers among shop owners, and running ‘educational’ seminars to cultivate a more detailed knowledge of [cheese] among retailers, expecting that they in turn would educate their customers” (Roseberry 1996). To understand this process I enrolled in a course offered in Toronto. The woman who initiated the course was herself a cheese buyer for North American distributors and retailers. My classmates on this journey were not what I expected and included employees of some of Toronto’s best restaurants, the provincially run wine outlet, food journalists, cheese distributors, buyers for grocery chains, and, ironically, people who already owned cheese shops, indicating the degree to which deciding to invest in and open a cheese shop is another indication that the expansion of cheese consumption in North America is being constructed through the action of entrepreneurs seeking out ways to create demand and construct value (rather than an outcome of consumer demand).

Notably the mechanism put in place to teach taste in relation to cheese in North America mimic those of European brokers at the turn of the century. And this reveals the

way in which taste development in support of consumption and the creation of symbolic and material value have, in many ways simply entered a phase of spatial expansion. As the product - cheese – travels through wider circuits of consumption, the modes of teaching consumption travel as well. And those who do it well are rewarded indicating that the knowledge imparted through ‘experts’ is embedded in what we might call networks of mutual certification. As cheese consumption expands in North America, the brokers of consumption are recognized and sanctioned by producers and exporters in production locales. For example, Steve Jenkins, a partner in New York’s Fairway Market, and Kathy Strange, global cheese buyer for Whole Foods, have both been inducted into France’s *Guilde des Fromagers de Saint-Uguzon*,

the most celebrated association of cheesemongers and specialists in France, recognized for comprehensive knowledge and attention to the merits of French cheese. Founded in 1969 to safeguard and promote quality cheeses with a goal to create synergy around cheese production and to promote cheese consumption. (<http://media.wholefoodsmarket.com/news/whole-foods-market-global-cheese-buyer-cathy-strange-inducted-into-prestigi/>)

Here then, is the added value of personal recognition, in the form of an award used by a producer’s association to validate that retailers are effectively brokering consumption, and, to paraphrase Brodhag (2000), advocating consumption models and life styles that contribute to personal development, and providing consumers with the capacity to orient their consumption in ways that extend the market for, in this case, French cheese, with all of its associated material and symbolic value. For markets to expand and the profitability of particular relations of production to increase, products must not only be shipped to new outlets, but, particularly in relation to commodities that aspire to an epicurean status, consumers need to internalize the product (and its mode and relations of production) as essential not only to their well-being but to their identity (Foster 2006).

Many scholars have traced the social relations and material linkages that the movement of commodities creates and within which the value of commodities emerges. But for products that come to be labeled or designated ‘fine’ we also need to examine the

movement of commodities in relation to projects that create and subsequently exploit the value of a 'fine' commodity. One of the most important of these projects is connoisseurship, which, in a cultural economic context that prizes marketing and 'expert knowledge', has become incredibly lucrative for the value that the positive judgment of a connoisseur can yield to a product like cheese.<sup>19</sup> The 'right' judgment from the 'right' expert can rapidly expand the geographic distribution of a cheese, producing new meaning and value for a commodity and the consumption of that commodity in a new setting. It is to define, through assertion, arrogance and the invocation of authority, what that commodity is, or should be, for others. The point here is that connoisseurship is a practice that acts on prestige commodities to give those commodities meaning in new sites of consumption that enhances value not only for the product but also for the person who eats it.

The domination of the connoisseur's voice is strong. One evening in my maître fromager course a fellow student was leading us through a tasting of Shropshire Blue, a British cheese that first appeared in the early 1980s. Despite its recent origin my classmate described the difficulty she had in finding an accurate history of its development and said that there were a number of stories in circulation. The instructor quickly produced Max McCalman's *Cheese: A Connoisseur's Guide to the World's Best*, and recited his history of Shropshire Blue. Whether McCalman's history or impressions were accurate is beside the point. What the instructor was implicitly illustrating, in her turn to the book, was that in the development of connoisseurship "there is a structure of authority to judgments that radiate from the representative-declarative acts of some to inform those of others by a kind of interdiscursivity."<sup>20</sup> One quotes or cites or alludes to authority in orienting oneself to the object of aesthetic judgment." (Silverstein 2006, 483).

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<sup>19</sup> Here I distinguish between previously existing ethnic or place-based identities associated with consuming cheeses associated with one's place of origin (e.g., Italians and their descendants living in Toronto seeking out regional cheeses that help to perform and reproduce an 'authentic' identity away from 'home') and the class identities associated with the development of connoisseurship that claims a knowledge across a **diversity** of cheeses rather than an identity associated with the consumption of a regional product.

<sup>20</sup> In response to another student's question - "Are you supposed to eat the rind on cheese?" - she responded "Well it's really personal taste, but Max McCalman, who's **the** cheese guy, and is the cheese consultant for Artisanal in New York, never eats the rind because he thinks the taste interferes with the wines he chooses to go with them."



The capacity for appreciation of a cheese, then, requires the production of an adjudicator - ‘the connoisseur’, with the ability to appreciate and distinguish between products on the basis of certain criteria and a ‘sense of taste’. That production centers on the tasting, a major part of every class in the course:

Eyes first, what are the **visual** cues, what is the **colour** of the **paste**? What is the **texture** of the cheese? What does that tell you about **production**? What type of rind covers the paste? What is the colour of the **rind**? What does the colour of the rind tell you about the **age**? Then the **nose**. The paste first, never the rind. Break open the paste to acquire a **fresh** scent. What do you **smell**? How do you **characterize** the **aroma**? What does the smell tell you about **production**? Now the **flavour**. No, no, we don’t bite cheese, we don’t chew it. We suck it. Remember, from the paste outward to the rind. A Blue cheese? Taste the white paste before the blue spores. What hits you **first**? What about **secondary** flavour? And the **finish ...** ? (Fieldnotes, Toronto, Oct. 2008)

Within each of these bold words are a host of descriptors – fresh, bloomy, encrusted, lactic, musty, grassy, barny, runny, supple, satiny, balanced, acidulous, livery (the list, and there **is** a list, goes on) - that are to be recorded under specific categories and referred to in the development of an aesthetic memory

A significant component in the development of expertise and connoisseurship, then, is not simply the refinement of observation and taste, but what Silverstein (2006; 491) calls the “mastery of a register”... the development of a specific vocabulary and “a characteristic way of talking about some area of experience” that not only demonstrates knowledge of a commodity, but serves to “index one’s membership in the social group that characteristically does so”, and distinguish one from social groups that do not. It is the disciplining quality of this register and that my classmates and I were made subject to – as we learned to discipline our palette, and translate sensory experience into language, we also learned to communicate that in ways that would satisfy the needs of diverse bodies of consumers. Gradually as the course proceeded it became clear that the aim was to realize value through overcoming discontinuities in knowledge, and anxiety produced

as commodities like cheese enter new and unfamiliar terrain; providing comfort for “our clientele” and orienting their interests in ways that bring into being the consumption models and life styles that production and distribution networks desire. With the course completed we were set on our way replete with the tools needed to shape the field of taste.

## CONCLUSION

Cheese museums, cheese festivals, cheese classes. All of these mechanisms speak of the work needed to produce cheese as transnational and to the value created in doing so. Value, of course is a conflicted term. But even as the forms of qualification I have described spring from and address a multiplicity of politics they produce substantive capital gains. Cheese is not an economically trivial item. On any given day, for example, the value of Comté housed in just one of the Napoleonic-era forts above Lake Geneva used for aging the cheese can be \$118 million. Banks in Emilia-Romagna accept Parmigiano-Reggiano as collateral for production loans maintaining warehouses and a staff of cheese specialists that oversee the maturation of over 400,000 wheels worth \$187.5 million wholesale. The AOC criteria that legally allow a cheese to be labeled as Roquefort have changed five times since 1925. The most recent amendment, in May 2005, reduced the minimum time that cheeses must spend in the caves of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon to 14 days, allowing producers to overcome the production bottleneck that is the defining quality of a Roquefort – maturation in the caves – and to circulate more cheese through the caves in order to realize the capital gains of an increasing market demand. Rather than sacrifice the gains of an expanded market, the association of producers changed the material conditions of the cheese – five times. Whither authenticity?

There are clearly substantive gains to be realized through the forms of qualification that help to align and orchestrate fields of production and consumption. But what I have suggested in this paper is that there is something else at play. There is a history to cheese in which meaning will always be parochial but there has been an abiding need to give meaning to cheese, just as there has been to any food, as it has moved into new realms of consumption. That meaning changes as cheese travels; as it moves from places where people ‘know the stories’ and share common understanding, to

places where they do not, and meaning has to be created anew. In producing that meaning anew actors come together under structural conditions in a struggle to establish how cheese will be defined. That struggle involves the interests of farmers still trying to make a living out of producing cheese, affineurs and banks seeking to realize a return on production investments, distributors trying to command regimes of circulation, retailers trying to realize an entrepreneurial opportunity or live out the fantasy of being a ‘cheesemonger’, cultural entrepreneurs seeking to style themselves as experts or connoisseurs, and social movements seeking to defend models of localism through the spatial extension of markets for local products. The sites I have described in this chapter are sites of such meaning-making, but they are also sites in which we can locate the production of the transnational; sites where cheese is defined through ideological formations that transcend the nation even as they have been historically subordinate to it. Qualifiers like cultural, natural, local, and traditional, for example, are no longer uniquely tethered to the nation. They transcend it, just as the actors engaged in struggles over meaning are configured in ways that transcend the nation. Even as they reside within it, their ideological and material interest in cheese connects them in ways that configure a space of transnationalism. The actors who constitute fields of production and consumption have no single unifying identity, ethnic or national, that binds them together. Their relations are drawn together and configured by cheese. But as the circulation of cheese expands and as these actors come into more regular contact physically and virtually, the grounds for new common meaning systems emerges – expressed through, for example, the standardized registers of cheese promoted in my maitre fromager course – along with new sense-making and sense-giving processes. An outcome of this is that ideologies of culture, nature and ‘the local’ have come to transcend the nation because of the way they articulate with a politics of consumption rooted in a personal identity politics detached from ‘the nation’. Even as these can reference particular locales, they have become near-universal with the capacity to link consumers across other boundaries of identity and situate them in a common politics of consumption that can simultaneously be used to qualify the objects like cheese. And even as qualifying actors shape those politics, those politics bring a transnational cultural economy of cheese into being.

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